

HAPPY 108TH BIRTHDAY TO MARY COFFEY

(Mr. OLSON asked and was given permission to address the House for 1 minute and to revise and extend his remarks.)

Mr. OLSON. Mr. Speaker, 100 years is a century. It is a really long time. 108 years of life is a blessing.

A young lady I work for in the Texas 22nd Congressional District, who lives in my hometown of Sugar Land, is such a blessing. Her name is Mary Coffey, and she celebrated her 108th birthday on March 20.

In a recent article in the Fort Bend Star, Mary described her keys to being blessed: Number one, trust Jesus and lead several Bible studies with your friends; number two, get plenty of exercise; number three, eat healthy; and number four is about personal hygiene, have jar after jar after jar of Pond's cold cream available when you need it most.

For 108 years, Mary has inspired all of us.

Happy 108th birthday, Mary. Let's go out; maybe go out dancing if you promise not to wear me out.

INVESTIGATION INTO RUSSIAN CONNECTIONS IS LONG OVERDUE

(Ms. KAPTUR asked and was given permission to address the House for 1 minute and to revise and extend her remarks.)

Ms. KAPTUR. Mr. Speaker, today The Washington Post reported that the United Arab Emirates arranged a secret meeting in January between Blackwater founder and major Trump contributor Erik Prince and a Russian close to President Vladimir Putin. The meeting was an apparent effort to establish a back-channel line of communication between Moscow and President-elect Donald Trump, according to U.S., European, and Arab officials.

Erik Prince, by the way, is the brother to Betsy DeVos, the Secretary of Education. The UAE's incentive to broker this meeting comes from the deteriorating relationship between them and Iran. They wanted to drive a wedge between Russia, Iran, and Syria. Agreement on that deal would need a handsome reward, like the easing of U.S. sanctions on the Russian Federation for its invasion of Ukraine.

Blackwater is the private security firm that became infamous for U.S. abuses in Iraq after a series of incidents, including one in 2007 in which the company's guards were charged and criminally convicted of killing civilians.

"Officials said Zayed and his brother, the UAE's national security adviser, coordinated the Seychelles meeting with Russian Government officials with the goal of establishing an unofficial back channel between Trump and Putin." The UAE at one point paid Erik Prince's firm a reported half a billion dollars to consult on defensive security.

An independent bipartisan commission to investigate Trump officials and Russian connections is long overdue.

[From the Washington Post, Apr. 3, 2017]

BLACKWATER FOUNDER HELD SECRET SEYCHELLES MEETING TO ESTABLISH TRUMP-PUTIN BACK CHANNEL

(By Adam Entous, Greg Miller, Kevin Sieff and Karen DeYoung)

The United Arab Emirates arranged a secret meeting in January between Blackwater founder Erik Prince and a Russian close to President Vladimir Putin as part of an apparent effort to establish a back-channel line of communication between Moscow and President-elect Donald Trump, according to U.S., European and Arab officials.

The meeting took place around Jan. 11—nine days before Trump's inauguration—in the Seychelles islands in the Indian Ocean, officials said. Though the full agenda remains unclear, the UAE agreed to broker the meeting in part to explore whether Russia could be persuaded to curtail its relationship with Iran, including in Syria, a Trump administration objective that would likely require major concessions to Moscow on U.S. sanctions.

Though Prince had no formal role with the Trump campaign or transition team, he presented himself as an unofficial envoy for Trump to high-ranking Emiratis involved in setting up his meeting with the Putin confidant, according to the officials, who did not identify the Russian.

Prince was an avid supporter of Trump who gave \$250,000 last year to support the GOP nominee's campaign, records show. He has ties to people in Trump's circle, including Stephen K. Bannon, now serving as the president's chief strategist and senior counselor. Prince's sister Betsy DeVos serves as education secretary in the Trump administration. And Prince was seen in the Trump transition offices in New York in December.

U.S. officials said the FBI has been scrutinizing the Seychelles meeting as part of a broader probe of Russian interference in the 2016 U.S. election and alleged contacts between associates of Putin and Trump. The FBI declined to comment.

The Seychelles encounter, which one official said spanned two days, adds to an expanding web of connections between Russia and Americans with ties to Trump—contacts that the White House has been reluctant to acknowledge or explain until they have been exposed by news organizations.

"We are not aware of any meetings and Erik Prince had no role in the transition," said Sean Spicer, the White House press secretary.

"Erik had no role on the transition team. This is a complete fabrication," said a spokesman for Prince in a statement. "The meeting had nothing to do with President Trump. Why is the so-called underresourced intelligence community messing around with surveillance of American citizens when they should be hunting terrorists?"

Prince is best known as the founder of Blackwater, a security firm that became a symbol of U.S. abuses in Iraq after a series of incidents including one in 2007 in which the company's guards were accused—and later criminally convicted—of killing civilians in a crowded Iraqi square. Prince sold the firm, which was subsequently rebranded, but has continued building a private paramilitary empire with contracts across the Middle East and Asia.

Prince would probably have been seen as too controversial to serve in any official capacity in the Trump transition or administration. But his ties to Trump advisers, experience with clandestine work and relation-

ship with the royal leaders of the Emirates—where he moved in 2010 amid mounting legal problems for his American business—would have positioned him as an ideal go-between.

The Seychelles meeting came after private discussions in New York involving high-ranking representatives of Trump, Moscow and the Emirates.

The White House has acknowledged that Michael T. Flynn, Trump's original national security adviser, and Trump adviser and son-in-law Jared Kushner met with the Russian ambassador to the United States, Sergey Kislyak, in late November or early December in New York.

Flynn and Kushner were joined by Bannon for a separate meeting with the crown prince of Abu Dhabi, Sheikh Mohamed bin Zayed al-Nahyan, who made an undisclosed visit to New York later in December, according to the U.S., European and Arab officials who spoke on the condition of anonymity to discuss sensitive matters.

In an unusual breach of protocol, the UAE did not notify the Obama administration in advance of the visit, though officials found out because Zayed's name appeared on a flight manifest.

Officials said Zayed and his brother, the UAE's national security adviser, coordinated the Seychelles meeting with Russian government officials with the goal of establishing an unofficial back channel between Trump and Putin.

Officials said Zayed wanted to be helpful to both leaders who had talked about working more closely together, a policy objective long advocated by the crown prince. The UAE, which sees Iran as one of its main enemies, also shared the Trump team's interest in finding ways to drive a wedge between Moscow and Tehran.

Zayed met twice with Putin in 2016, according to Western officials, and urged the Russian leader to work more closely with the Emirates and Saudi Arabia—an effort to isolate Iran.

At the time of the Seychelles meeting and for weeks afterward, the UAE believed that Prince had the blessing of the new administration to act as its unofficial representative. The Russian participant was a person whom Zayed knew was close to Putin from his interactions with both men, the officials said.

When the Seychelles meeting took place, official contacts between members of the incoming Trump administration and the Russian government were under intense scrutiny, both from federal investigators and the press.

Less than a week before the Seychelles meeting, U.S. intelligence agencies released a report accusing Russia of intervening clandestinely during the 2016 election to help Trump win the White House.

The FBI was already investigating communications between Flynn and Kislyak. The Washington Post's David Ignatius first disclosed those communications on Jan. 12, around the time of the Seychelles meeting. Flynn was subsequently fired by Trump for misleading Vice President Pence and others about his discussions with Kislyak.

Yousef Al Otaiba, the UAE's ambassador in Washington, declined to comment.

Government officials in the Seychelles said they were not aware of any meetings between Trump and Putin associates in the country around Jan. 11. But they said luxury resorts on the island are ideal for clandestine gatherings like the one described by the U.S., European and Arab officials.

"I wouldn't be surprised at all," said Barry Faure, the Seychelles secretary of state for foreign affairs. "The Seychelles is the kind of place where you can have a good time away from the eyes of the media. That's even

printed in our tourism marketing. But I guess this time you smelled something.”

Trump has dismissed the investigations of Russia's role in the election as “fake news” and a “witch hunt.”

The level of discretion surrounding the Seychelles meeting seems extraordinary given the frequency with which senior Trump advisers, including Flynn and Kushner, had interacted with Russian officials in the United States, including at the high-profile Trump Tower in New York.

Steven Simon, a National Security Council senior director for the Middle East and North Africa in the Obama White House, said: “The idea of using business cutouts, or individuals perceived to be close political leaders, as a tool of diplomacy is as old as the hills. These unofficial channels are desirable precisely because they are deniable; ideas can be tested without the risk of failure.”

Current and former U.S. officials said that while Prince refrained from playing a direct role in the Trump transition, his name surfaced so frequently in internal discussions that he seemed to function as an outside adviser whose opinions were valued on a range of issues, including plans for overhauling the U.S. intelligence community.

He appears to have particularly close ties to Bannon, appearing multiple times as a guest on Bannon's satellite radio program over the past year as well as in articles on the Breitbart Web site that Bannon ran before joining the Trump campaign.

In a July interview with Bannon, Prince said those seeking forceful U.S. leadership should “wait till January and hope Mr. Trump is elected.” And he lashed out at President Barack Obama, saying that because of his policies “the terrorists, the fascists, are winning.”

Days before the November election, Prince appeared on Bannon's program again, saying that he had “well-placed sources” in the New York City Police Department telling him they were preparing to make arrests in the investigation of former congressman Anthony Weiner (D-N.Y.) over allegations he exchanged sexually explicit texts with a minor. Flynn tweeted a link to the Breitbart report on the claim. No arrests occurred.

Prince went on to make a series of unfounded assertions that damaging material recovered from Weiner's computers would implicate Hillary Clinton and her close adviser, Huma Abedin, who was married to Weiner. He also called Abedin an “agent of influence very sympathetic to the Muslim Brotherhood.”

Prince and his family were major GOP donors in 2016. After the Republican convention, he contributed \$250,000 to Trump's campaign, the national party and a pro-Trump super PAC led by GOP mega-donor Rebekah Mercer. The Center for Responsive Politics reported that the family gave more than \$2.7 million to GOP candidates and super PACs, including about \$2.7 million from his sister, DeVos, and her husband.

Prince's father, Edgar Prince, built his fortune through an auto-parts company. Betsy married Richard DeVos Jr., heir to the Amway fortune.

Erik Prince has had lucrative contracts with the UAE government, which at one point paid his firm a reported \$529 million to help bring in foreign fighters to help assemble an internal paramilitary force capable of carrying out secret operations and protecting Emirati installations from terrorist attacks.

The Trump administration and the UAE appear to share a similar preoccupation with Iran. Current and former officials said that Trump advisers were focused throughout the transition period on exploring ways to get Moscow to break ranks with Tehran.

“Separating Russia from Iran was a common theme,” said a former intelligence official in the Obama administration who met with Trump transition officials. “It didn't seem very well thought out. It seemed a little premature. They clearly had a very specific policy position, which I found odd given that they hadn't even taken the reins and explored with experts in the U.S. government the pros and cons of that approach.”

Michael McFaul, former U.S. ambassador to Russia, said he also had discussions with people close to the Trump administration about the prospects of drawing Russia away from Iran. “When I would hear this, I would think, ‘Yeah that's great for you guys, but why would Putin ever do that?’” McFaul said. “There is no interest in Russia ever doing that. They have a long relationship with Iran. They're allied with Iran in fighting in Syria. They sell weapons to Iran. Iran is an important strategic partner for Russia in the Middle East.”

Following the New York meeting between the Emiratis and Trump aides, Zayed was approached by Prince, who said he was authorized to act as an unofficial surrogate for the president-elect, according to the officials. He wanted Zayed to set up a meeting with a Putin associate. Zayed agreed and proposed the Seychelles as the meeting place because of the privacy it would afford both sides. “He wanted to be helpful,” one official said of Zayed.

Wealthy Russians and Emirati royalty have a particularly large footprint on the islands. Signs advertising deep-sea fishing trips are posted in Cyrillic. Russian billionaire Mikhail Prokhorov owns North Island, where Prince William and Catherine, Duchess of Cambridge, went on their honeymoon in 2011. Sheikh Khalifa bin Zayed al-Nahyan, president of the UAE, built a hilltop palace for himself with views across the chain of islands.

The Emiratis have given hundreds of millions of dollars to the Seychelles in recent years for causes including public health and affordable housing. But when the Emirati royal family visits, they are rarely seen.

“The jeep comes to their private jet on the tarmac and then they disappear,” said one Seychellois official who spoke on the condition of anonymity because he did not want to be seen as criticizing the Emiratis.

Zayed, the crown prince, owns a share of the Seychelles Four Seasons, a collection of private villas scattered on a lush hillside on the main island's southern shore, overlooking the Indian Ocean, according to officials in the Seychelles. The hotel is tucked away on a private beach, far from the nearest public road.

Current and former U.S. officials who have worked closely with Zayed, who is often referred to as MBZ, say it would be out of character for him to arrange the Jan. 11 meeting without getting a green light in advance from top aides to Trump and Putin, if not the leaders themselves. “MBZ is very cautious,” said an American businessman who knows Zayed. “There had to be a nod.”

The Seychelles meeting was deemed productive by the UAE and Russia but the idea of arranging additional meetings between Prince and Putin's associates was dropped, officials said. Even unofficial contacts between Trump and Putin associates had become too politically risky, officials said.

Sieff reported from the Seychelles. Julie Tate, Devlin Barrett, Matea Gold, Tom Hamburger and Rosalind S. Helderman contributed to this report.

HONORING CHIEF CLINT GREENWOOD

(Mr. POE of Texas asked and was given permission to address the House for 1 minute.)

Mr. POE of Texas. Mr. Speaker, early this morning, Precinct 3 Assistant Chief Clint Greenwood put on his uniform, secured his badge over his heart, and he headed off to work.

As he arrived at the courthouse at 7 a.m., shots suddenly rang out. After the smoke cleared, Chief Greenwood was shot in the neck. His fellow officers rushed to his aid, and he was airlifted to a nearby Houston hospital, but it was too late. Texas lost another one of its finest men in blue.

The suspect is still at large, but not for long. As the investigation develops, it is still unclear if Deputy Chief Greenwood was specifically targeted or if he was ambushed because he wore the uniform. Law enforcement will do everything in their power to find and apprehend the murderous outlaw.

Chief Greenwood dedicated 30 years of his life to the law. I knew Clint when I worked as a judge in Houston, Texas. He was a prosecutor. He was a defense lawyer. He worked for the sheriff's department, and now more recently as a member of the constable's office. He was of strong character and a proud Texas lawman.

Texas prays for Chief Greenwood's family and the Harris County, Texas, constable's office. Our men and women who wear the badge are the best we have. They protect and serve our communities. Chief Greenwood's life may be gone, but his memory serves as a reminder of all those who give their lives for the thin blue line. Back the blue, Mr. Speaker. Back the blue.

And that is just the way it is.

ELECTRIC UTILITY TRANSMISSION LINES IN NATIONAL FORESTS

(Mr. LAMALFA asked and was given permission to address the House for 1 minute and to revise and extend his remarks.)

Mr. LAMALFA. Mr. Speaker, tonight I am pleased to announce the Electric Reliability and Forest Protection Act of 2017, cosponsored by my colleague Representative SCHRADER of Washington.

Thousands of miles of electric utility transmission lines run through our national forests, key infrastructure that literally keeps the lights on across the West. Unfortunately, existing Forest Service rules hinder effective removal of hazardous trees and safe management of transmission rights-of-way. In too many cases, the inability to address hazards in a timely fashion results in blackouts, damaged infrastructure, and even forest fires, something we have too much of in the West, as you know. This all could be prevented if electric utilities were allowed to remove the dangers in a timely fashion.

This bill will reform that broken system by streamlining the process for